

## Politics as Personal Player Choice: *Baldur's Gate 3* Politically Personal Character Narratives

Jay Smith

*Baldur's Gate 3*, Larian Studios' massive narrative roleplaying video game, is a deeply political work in our current socio-political landscape. This is largely because the game includes representations of normalised and destigmatized bi/pansexuality, polyamory, and non-cisnormative gender expressions. *Baldur's Gate 3*'s narrative design, especially around its secondary characters, extends a notion of the personal into direct political experience for players. My personal interest here is shown in how the narrative arcs for two characters (Astarion and Wyll) create an understanding of the personal as a form of political action and fundamentally the political as extension of the personal.

Part of what makes *Baldur's Gate 3* interesting to both discuss and play is how narratively open the game feels, while still seemingly drawing the player on a simple overarching plot line. This does lead to the game being challenging to talk about in absolute terms, since any given player may engage with these narratives in fundamentally different ways, or not at all. This analysis, as a result, will depend heavily on my personal experience with these narratives, an experience that is not exhaustive or fully complete for every option in the game. This article is thus representative of both generalities and, also my personal experience.

Before getting to the characters however, a discussion of how I am using the term "political" is required, as its definition is generally nebulous. To be political can be to address explicit politics, the acts and systems of governments, power, and oppression, but more recently it can be understood as something engaging with society and social problems. A tweet by Emma Vossen that addressed this frames it as "Gamers are still convinced that there are only: // Two races: white and "political" // Two genders: Male and "political" [...]" (Vossen 2019). The "gamers" in Vossen's analysis is not intrinsically linked to those who play games, but more accurately could be syncretized to politically conservative/reactionary attitudes present in that subset. Given that, accordingly this framing fundamentally makes any engagement with a non-dominant identity an expression of the nebulous "political". It is through Vossen's framing that elements of the personal become fundamentally politically charged. The idea is not that politics are intrinsic to an identity or even act, but rather that the political is socially constructed by the audience that is observing said identity or act.

This idea of the political is present in the main plot line, which follows a traditional expanding viewpoint model, where the story starts on the player character and small actions (i.e., helping one person or one small collective) and expands in each of the story's three acts until the fate of the world is at stake. What defines an "act" is where characters outside the party change states (such as location) without the party killing the character, mainly seen in characters like the Tieflings moving from the relative safety of Act One's sanctuary town to the dangers of Act Two's open spaces. As readers, we can understand this as a political extension of the personal, where the framing of the personal gradually extends to systems and societies on a macro-scale. However, this does not feel political, but rather it feels akin to the standardised "Save the World" plot.

It is instead the personal stories of the party characters that enable this more political exploration to take place. There are around eleven companions in the game with some degree of character side quest. Not all of these characters follow the notion of the political as personal actions, for example Karlach's main narrative is entirely personal, derived from the seeming death sentence of her artificial heart. Karlach's story is set up from her introduction and clearly personal throughout and the resolution of it is about helping her find meaning in her last days, and to get revenge on those who did this to her. However, using Vossen's notion of "gamer politics", Karlach is a woman and also, like all companions, bi/pansexual. The latter is mostly an extension of the design wanting to minimise constraint on the player character's romantic options. What this does do however, is it situates the companion characters like Karlach as intrinsically others to heteronormative society, with each of their individual stories exploring deviations from other norms of their cultural framework. Karlach is fleeing from the demonic hierarchy for wanting her freedom, a wholly personal motivation, while Astarion...

### **Astarion and the Politics of Queer Anti-Capitalist Vampires**

Astarion is a vampire. Astarion is rhetorically and functionally queer, like all the party members being bi/pansexual, but also has what can best be described as queer mannerisms. Astarion is a representation of the queer reclamation of the vampire as a symbol of the queer other. We see some of this in the article "The Vampire, the Queer, and the Girl: Reflections on the Politics and Ethics of Immortality's Gendering." by Kimberly J. Lau (2018). Lau identifies how the queer vampire is rooted in the earliest English novelized vampire stories, specifically how the vampire's monstrous nature is drawn as a parallel to homosexual relationships (Kimberly 2018, 5). It is then in modern works where the vampire's queerness becomes disentangled with the monstrousness, rather being coincidental or thematic. The idea being that there are still queer vampires, but their nature as queer is not comorbid with vampirism, but rather that vampires are people and people are queer.

Astarion's predominant motivation is derived from his previous subservient and abusive relationship to his master Cazador but enabled by the main plot to break free of that control. This freedom allows Astarion to understand and reject Cazador's design for him, but also become his own person. This development is expressed through many discussions with the player, where Astarion begins to move away from where he started this narrative (attempting to hold the player character hostage) towards a more rounded and emotionally available person. Through discussions with Astarion, the player learns that Cazador had emotionally, sexually, and physically abused Astarion for around two hundred years. This creates an understanding of Astarion, a damaged person, trying to take any shreds of power he can to protect himself. He expresses trepidation about going back to Baldur's Gate out of fear that Cazador might regain control over him there. It is this fear that Astarion's narrative gradually pushes against, leading him to open up to the player character, first about being a vampire, then his concerns with Cazador.

Once the player gets to Baldur's Gate, Astarion's plot becomes active, seeking out Cazador and killing him. What starts out as a revenge plot becomes entangled with a greater threat of Cazador himself, who wants to use Astarion among others to elevate himself to something approaching divinity. There is a lot to say about vampires and their metaphorical relationship to notions of bourgeois power. In "Marxferatu: The Vampire Metaphor as a Tool for Teaching Marx's Critique of Capitalism," Jason Morrissette (2013) describes the metaphor of the vampire's

relation to capitalist control as “owners step[ing] into the role of the vampire, draining the surplus value of the worker’s labor” (637). Cazador works as a textual manifestation of those ideas. He feeds off the poor, both in the traditional consumption of their blood as well as a form of ritual, collecting the poor as the literal fuel for a near deific ascension. He uses his accumulated power to manipulate and enforce his will upon society. Even those who serve him, like Astarion, are just tools for his ascension. There are parallels to be drawn between Cazador’s plan to ascend to near divinity through the deaths of thousands of the poor, and the ultra-rich’s obsession with moving to Mars. Both Cazador and figures like Jeff Bezos attempting to escape the consequences of the world they live in, the system that allows their empowerment, at the cost of the lives of others.

It is therefore fitting that Astarion, the most unloved and mistreated and queer coded of Cazador’s servants, is the means of Cazador’s failure. It is a message that those who are marginalised by society can personally act against their oppressors and win. It is a political action entangled with and rooted in a deeply personal exploration. It is perhaps critical that, unlike other side quests with this structure, once Cazador is defeated, the narrative decision is not whether Cazador should die, but whether Astarion should take Cazador’s place (at the cost of the lives of thousands of Cazador’s other victims). The idea that the oppressed will become the oppressor if given the opportunity becomes one crucial option in the game play. However, the game allows for Astarion to be persuaded to reject the choice, with three additional options that push Astarion away from this choice.

### **Wyll and the Politics of Rejection**

Wyll’s narrative is fundamentally entwined with the main plot more than any other party member, with it being impossible to fully complete Wyll’s narrative without taking a specific path in the main plot as well. It is also one of the largest and most elaborate side narratives in the game, to the degree that the number of outcomes varies wildly. This is partially because Wyll’s backstory entangles him directly with the political power structures of the city Baldur’s Gate, being the son of one of the dukes of the city. Wyll has a concrete understanding of right and wrong that revolves around protecting people at any cost to himself, including the possibility of his death.

This self-sacrificing behaviour is seen in Wyll’s mechanical class as a warlock, a class of character that have bound themselves to an extra-planar entity for power. The idea of the warlock is generally a replication of the trope of the Faustian Bargain and, like Astarion with vampirism, Wyll is an interrogation of how we moralise that trope. While versions of this narrative predate it, a prominent example in the Western literature on this theme is that of Christopher Marlow’s *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, hence the term “Faustian Bargain” as near synonymous in the cultural mindset with “deal with the devil” (2014). Where Wyll differs from Faustus is in motivation, with Faustus’s deal being born of ambition, Wyll’s is one of desperation. The player is told that Wyll’s contract was started in an attempt to save the people of Baldur’s Gate years ago, that it was him attempting the only thing he could think of to stop the loss of life. His temptation towards his contract is entirely altruistic and in service of the general good. Despite this, Wyll is exiled by his father, Duke Ravenguard, for this contract, with his father understanding any contract with a demon as only stemming from ambition or moral failing. Duke Ravenguard takes a morally absolute position while Wyll takes one of relativist or, to invoke ethical philosophy, utilitarian position.

With the aforementioned divergences of Wyll's plot line, the player can direct Wyll's narrative towards him attempting to escape his contract because of how it negatively impacts him. While elements of this plot line start appearing as early as Act One, they come to a head in Act Three where Duke Ravenguard is kidnapped at the start of the game by the cult that serves as the game's main antagonist, with him always being just out of reach until Act Three. Mizora offers to save Ravenguard, but at the cost of Wyll's contract becoming permanent. There is a genuine argument for both sides, with neither seeming out of character for Wyll to make, with both cementing and understanding of Wyll as he relates to systems of law and power. To accept Mizora's offer is to value power as a means of changing society, even if that power also restrains your action. In rejecting Mizora, the choice my Wyll made, we see a Wyll who accepts that power is not neutral, it is a bond that restricts and makes real change impossible. Wyll becomes a nexus between a liberal and anarchist understanding of power and power dynamics.

Importantly, it is still possible to save Duke Ravenguard, but the challenge in a mechanical sense is increased because Mizora is acting against you. This makes succeeding on this feel rewarding, like conquering not a person, but the system of oppression that person signified. The idea that you do not need to follow the law if that law does not lead to justice or perpetuates injustice is a radicalising message. That message becomes the core of my Wyll narrative after this point, with later developments with Duke Ravenguard culminating in Wyll rejecting the system of hierarchy in order to better protect people.

Ravenguard offers Wyll a political title and the responsibility of it, but the majority of the Act Three is a process of understanding that Baldur's Gate itself is based upon inequality, and that the military/police enable and empower the elevation of a tyrant to power. My Wyll understood that any action within that system would cater to or be complicit in the same power structure that led to the tyranny of the main plot. The idea that this choice is but one of several options for Wyll makes each a deeply personal decision for the player, but it also shows how the player is engaging the game's political elements. If I had pushed Wyll towards taking this power, I would recognize that my Wyll would be out of place there, that the systems of power do not fit for a character whose main choice was rejecting power in service of protecting others. I personally could have framed it as Wyll "changing the system from the inside", but his narrative was about trying that, and it failed him. There is this notion of the inevitability of failure from symptomatic political action that Wyll's narrative is a direct critique of.

### **Conclusion: On Personal Choice**

This analysis, though grounded in the broader trajectory of the character's plots, is fundamentally grounded in my personal choices. My Wyll chose to break his contract because I stood beside him on that choice. My Astarion chose to reject Cazador's power because I recognized how it would harm him emotionally. I can say that for me, with where these characters ended up, their narratives felt complete and fulfilling, with elements like Wyll's rejection of political power allowing him to help another companion at the end of the game. Astarion is forced to flee from the sun at the end of the game, when what was protecting him fades away and leaves him vulnerable again.

Part of what makes these endings satisfying is how they resolve and entwine the political themes of their narrative into the completion. Rejecting power, whether physical or social, has its

personal costs. The political elements of these narratives are means of making the player explore their own relationship to these ideas, with the personal and emotional connections being means of grounding the player's choices. *Baldur's Gate 3*'s narrative design pushes players to recognize and accept that the political is grounded in the personal: that any discussion of power, legality, or systems is personal.

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